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SUBJECT: PA AND FATAH OFFICIALS CONSIDER HOLDING LOCAL
ELECTIONS IN 2010

Classified By: CG Daniel Rubinstein, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Senior Palestinian Authority (PA) and Fatah officials have begun discussing the possibility of holding local elections in 2010 to replace existing local councils, all of whose terms expired in 2009 or earlier. There are several factors driving the push for elections, including support for democratic governance and a desire to consolidate the nationalist Palestinian camp against Hamas before national elections. Significant barriers still lie ahead for local elections this year, such as disagreements over the staging of elections and Hamas's participation. The PA Minister of Local Governance (MoLG), Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, and the senior Fatah official in charge of elections shared different visions of how the elections could unfold. The PA cabinet is expected to adopt a formal proposal by February. End Summary.

PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS DISCUSS NECESSITY
AND POSSIBILITY OF HOLDING LOCAL ELECTIONS

¶2. (SBU) As of late 2009, senior PA and Fatah officials were discussing how and when to hold local elections in the Palestinian territories. Local elections were last held in 2005 in most of the 426 Palestinian municipalities and villages, but elections in 62 remaining areas -- including Tulkarm, Hebron, and Yatta -- have not been held since the 1970s. As of December 2009, the four-year terms of all local councils had expired, and the PA Cabinet converted existing councils to a caretaker status until new elections occur.

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Fayyad told the Consul General in late December that municipal elections should happen "as soon as practical." MoLG Khalid Qawasmah told the Consul General in early January that he is developing a proposal for local elections in 2010 (possibly to begin in May), which he plans to put before the Cabinet for a decision by mid-February. Separately, the Central Elections Commission (CEC) is working with the PA to train registration and polling staff in anticipation of elections, with the training scheduled to conclude by April.

WEST BANK OFFICIALS HOPE ELECTIONS WILL BOLSTER
MODERATE PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

¶4. (C) Several factors are driving the interest in local elections. Qawasmah told the Consul General in early January that PA officials believe elections will reinforce Palestinians' democratic experience, preserve local councils' legitimacy, and satisfy Palestinians' expectations that elections occur regularly. Fatah Central Committee (FCC) member Muhammad al-Madani told Fatah leaders in late December that postponing elections plays into Hamas's strategy to "block democracy."

15. (C) Elections would also relegitimize current leaders and bring new leadership into the municipalities. In 2009, the MoLG dissolved at least four local councils for corruption, inefficiency, or vacancy -- a move that Palestinian parties (including Fatah and Hamas) criticized as undemocratic. Al-Madani said publicly last month that the people, not the PA, should choose their local leaders. Qawasmah said that Fatah and other PLO factions also believe local elections will consolidate the moderate Palestinian nationalist camp in preparation for PA national elections, and provide a testing ground for Palestinian voting behavior.

OFFICIALS DISAGREE OVER ELECTIONS LAW

16. (C) PA officials still face significant obstacles to holding local elections in 2010. For instance, they disagree on the timing and structure of elections. A 2005 law specified that local elections would take place simultaneously in all areas, and the CEC -- the body responsible for organizing the elections -- has discouraged any changes to the law. Fatah officials, however, prefer holding elections in multiple stages, as was done formerly, according to Qawasmah. Doing so, he said, would allow PA security forces to provide better security at polling stations, and also give competing factions a chance to recalibrate their campaign strategy between stages.

HAMAS PARTICIPATION NOT KEY, BUT RELEVANT

17. (C) Hamas's participation also presents a challenge to

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election organizers. Qawasmah said that holding municipal elections in the West Bank only is not as politically sensitive as holding national elections without Gaza, because municipal elections were previously held in stages, creating a precedent. He predicted that Hamas would refuse to participate in elections in the West Bank and refuse to allow them in Gaza. Qawasmah said that if the Cabinet decides to hold local elections in 2010, the decision will not depend on Hamas participation. If Hamas opts not to run candidates, the elections would not be as useful for uniting the nationalist parties or gauging voter behavior, he admitted.

PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS OFFER DIFFERENT VISIONS FOR HOLDING ELECTIONS IN 2010

18. (C) Qawasmah said that local elections are currently only in the discussion stage, but he shared his vision for how elections could play out. He said he would prefer to hold elections only in the 132 largest Palestinian municipalities -- 107 in the West Bank and 25 in Gaza. Qawasmah said he wants to hold two rounds of elections, putting all Gazan municipalities in the second round, so that the PA can gauge the results in the West Bank before proceeding. He said he is aiming to hold elections in mid-May, if the CEC can obtain adequate funding from donors. Qawasmah acknowledged this proposal represented his own thinking, and he had not yet consulted Fayyad in detail. Qawasmah estimated the cost of elections at USD 5 million if they are held only in large municipalities. The CEC said elections would cost USD 8.5 million if held throughout the Palestinian territories.

19. (C) Fayyad told the Consul General in a separate conversation in early January that he expects local elections to occur in a single round. Politically, he said, the results would be "most significant." He noted that "people want elections," adding that local elections could provide a welcome relief from the current atmosphere of stalemate in the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation talks and the inability to hold presidential and legislative elections. "If we do it, we will do it right," he said.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Whether elections ultimately go forward will likely depend more on senior Fatah leaders than on Fayyad or Qawasmah, assuming they see the benefit of testing the electoral waters as outweighing potential risks. Absent a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, Hamas will likely boycott, raising questions over the legitimacy of the process. Nonetheless, at this stage, our Fatah and PA contacts appear focused on using these and other elections (such as syndicates and youth organizations) to begin to measure prospects for eventual national elections.

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